

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL  
25 January 1985

VARTANIAN WINS GOP CHAIR  
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CONCORD, NH

After the state's Republican Party had picked a new leader, Gov. John Sununu noted some had called the leadership struggle a tempest in a teapot.

But Sununu, whose candidate had won the post, said the tea should still taste good now that the tempest is over. "We're stronger for having gone through this. I don't think there's a cleavage," Sununu said.

The tempest pitted Rep. Elsie Vartanian, R-Salem, against former CIA official Max Hugel. Vartanian won Thursday night, receiving 198 votes to 157 for Hugel.

Although there were eight more votes counted than delegates present, Hugel moved to make Vartanian's victory unanimous.

"I'll leave it as it is," said Hugel.

Vartanian called the victory a "reflection of the unity of the Republican Party." She is a four-term representative and will succeed former GOP Chairwoman Donna Sytek, who resigned last year for an unsuccessful run for secretary of state.

Hugel, who had contended during his campaign that Vartanian's House seat was a conflict of interest, said he hopes future party heads are nominated by delegates.

Vartanian had been nominated by a party committee comprised of Sununu, the state's congressional delegation, and legislative leaders. Sununu had opposed Hugel, citing Hugel's ownership share in Rockingham Park, a thoroughbred track regulated by the state.

Prior to the election, Vartanian denied she was Sununu's handpicked candidate and pledged to unify the party against Democrats like Dudley Dudley and Chris Spirow, who both lost elections in November.

"We will also make sure that the likes of Dudley Dudley and Chris Spirow will never serve in office again," said Vartanian, drawing scattered applause from an audience of about 450.

Hugel told the audience before the voting to vote for their independence and not follow party leadership. He dismissed his affiliation with a regulated industry.

"I don't think you can use a regulated industry as a reason for not supporting a candidate," Hugel said. "You are voting for your own independence when you vote for me. You don't have to be told what to do."